

WASHINGTON – The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Kirk Amendment to the Coast Guard Authorization Act (H.R. 2830) today that would close a loophole that threatens to wipe out thousands of fish in the Great Lakes. The Kirk Amendment targets viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS), a highly contagious disease killing thousands of fish in Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario.

“Since its introduction in 2005, viral hemorrhagic septicemia represents an enormous threat to biodiversity in our lakes,” Congressman Kirk said. “Spreading rapidly throughout the Great Lakes, this virus threatens to cost billions of dollars to the region in lost fishing and tourism revenue. We need to ensure that ships do not further spread this disease in their ballast water. Closing this loophole will provide the Secretary of Agriculture the necessary weapons to prevent an ecological and economic crisis.”

The Kirk Amendment gives the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to request that Great Lakes vessels install ballast water treatment systems approved by the U.S. Coast Guard. Currently, only ships entering the Great Lakes are required to treat ballast water to prevent the introduction of invasive species. Pathogens like VHS and invasive species stow away in cargo ships and other freighters, and release when ballast water is discharged. Even ships categorized as No Ballast on Board (NO BOB) have significant ballast water amounts to transport diseases and invasive species.

The amendment is supported by the Healing Our Water Coalition, National Environmental Coalition on Invasive Species, Great Lakes United, Defenders of Wildlife, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Areas Association, The Nature Conservancy and Union of Concerned Scientists